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THE EVOLUTION OF THE NEGRO BAPTIST CHURCH

The freedom and local democracy of the Baptist Church enabled the Negroes to participate in the affairs thereof much earlier than they were so indulged in the other denominations. Pioneer Negro preachers and churches, therefore, first appeared in the Baptist Church. The development of the attitude of the Baptist Church toward the Negro, however, has been by cycles. The relations of the two races in church matters differ widely from what they were years ago. Members of both races formerly belonged to the same congregation, which in the beginning in this country ignored social distinctions. They have since then undergone radical changes to reach the present situation in which they have all but severed connection with each other.

In the beginning, the attitude of the so-called Christian whites toward the early Negro preachers was that of hostility. This opposition, however, did not come from the Baptists themselves, but from the master class. George Liele in the West Indies, Andrew Bryan in Georgia, and David George in Canada had much difficulty in their pioneer work, suffering many indignities and hardships. Andrew Bryan was whipped in a cruel and bloody manner but triumphed over persecution by his bold declaration that he was willing to die for Jesus. Rev. Mr. Moses, working in Virginia about this time, was often arrested and whipped for holding meetings. Others were excommunicated, but such opposition could not stay the progress of the work, for these pioneer preachers finally succeeded. This is attested by the resolution of the white Baptist Association expressing deep regret on the occasion of the death of Andrew Bryan.¹

¹ The resolution was: "The association is sensibly affected by the death of the Rev. Andrew Bryan, a man of color, and pastor of the first colored

When the Baptists had won a standing after the grant of toleration in the United States and Negroes began to connect themselves with them, the status of the blacks in the Baptist Church had to be determined. Was the Negro to be a mere member in the back seat or a participant in the work of the Church? Under the labors of inspired white men thousands of Negroes were converted, baptized, set apart as churches, and instructed in all things which pertain to a life becoming the gospel of Christ. White persons, on the other hand, have been converted through the preaching of Negroes, and a few Negroes, even in the Southland, have been pastors of white Baptist churches. Speaking of the resignation of Mr. Thomas Armistead, who was pastor of the Portsmouth Church, in Virginia, until 1792, Robert B. Semple, in his *History of the Baptists of Virginia*, remarks: "After his resignation the church declined greatly. They employed Josiah Bishop, a black man of considerable talents, to preach to them. This, as might have been expected, could not answer in Virginia."²

Another instance of the same character is related by Mr. Semple, in connection with the Pettsworth or Gloucester Church. In his statement in regard to the death of Rev. Robert Hudgin, their first pastor, he observes that "This church continued to prosper moderately until Mr. Hudgin's death. They were then left without any person to go in and out before them. They at length did what it would hardly have been supposed would have been done by Virginians; they chose for their pastor William Lemon, a man of color." "He also died after several years. Since then," remarks Mr. Semple, "they have been destitute of Church in Savannah. This son of Africa, after suffering inexpressible persecutions in the cause of his Divine Master, was at length permitted to discharge the duties of the ministry among his colored friends in peace and quiet, hundreds of whom, through his instrumentality, were brought to the knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus. He closed his extensively useful, and amazingly luminous course, in the lively exercise of faith, and in the joyful hope of a happy immortality." See Benedict's *History of the Baptists*.

² Semple, *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, p. 355.

stated ministerial aid." Here, then, is a man of color, who was pastor of a white Baptist Church in Virginia to the day of his death, covering a period of "several years."³

There is still another case, in which the order of things is reversed, and this the most remarkable in the history of the South. In 1798 there appeared in southwest Mississippi a colored Baptist preacher, Joseph Willis, a mulatto, who being duly licensed was very zealous to exercise his gift as a minister. In 1804 he crossed the Mississippi River and began a work into which he put a half century of earnest endeavor. After preaching at Vermillion and Plaquemine Brulé for eight years, amidst hardships and bitter persecutions, unaided and alone, and sacrificing a small fortune in the struggle, he was able, with the aid of visiting ministers, to constitute the first Baptist Church at Bayou Chicot. Other churches, the fruits of his labors, soon sprang into being, and in 1818 the Louisiana Baptist Association was constituted, with these churches as a nucleus. Joseph Willis was pastor of the church at Bayou Chicot for a number of years. As moderator of the Louisiana Baptist Association he was honored and respected—indeed, beloved and spoken of as "Father Willis." That a Negro should have the honor of giving to Louisiana its first mixed Baptist church and of being the pastor of that church—that a Negro was the first moderator of Louisiana's first white Baptist association,⁴ and rendered the denomination fifty years of service, causes us greatly to marvel in these days of race division and race antipathy.

The Negro members of white Baptist churches of this country were, as a rule, permitted to worship with their white brethren within certain fixed limits. The gap between them, however, tended to widen. Later they were allowed another hour for worship, with large bounds and privileges. Still later they were provided with all the privileges of the Baptist meeting house under the restric-

³ Semple, *History of the Baptists in Virginia*, p. 356.

⁴ *The Negro Year Book*, 1918-1919, p. 236; Benedict, *History of the Baptists*, 376.

tions of the white churches to which they belonged. The master class gradually reached the position of separating the races in worship, but for the security of slavery they deemed it wise to hold the Negroes as members of the white churches.

It was argued that, in all nature, living creatures move instinctively in groups after their kind, and that the Negro and the white man, left to themselves, do the same thing, as is evidenced by the fact that the black slave was ever offending against the institution of slavery by holding religious services after his own liking where only his own people were present and shared in the devotion. In this manner the master justified himself in segregating his slave in the house of God and pointed to the Court of the Gentiles, in the Temple of Jehovah, in confirmation of the righteousness of his act. But for some reason the untutored black slave was never entirely at home in the white man's church, with its special place for Negroes. He knew that the master could be at ease in any part of his church edifice. It was all his and he moved about through its aisles as a free man, but the slave was limited in his privileges, and was counted a good man only as he kept within the limits assigned him.

When the Negroes in the white Baptist churches of the South became very numerous, services for their special benefit were held in the church edifices, usually in the afternoon, by the pastor and other persons who felt a deep interest in them. In these meetings the colored members of the church not only enjoyed the freedom of the place for the time being, but often listened with great satisfaction to the exhortations of one or more of their own brethren who spoke by permission from the floor and not from the pulpit platform. These Negro exhorters were encouraged to exercise a measure of spiritual oversight in the midst of their brethren and so help the church and pastor in caring for the flock. The segregated group, in a separate church edifice, meeting for worship at the

same hours as the parent body, gave rise to the separate church altogether, with a white ministry. In this way many of the largest and most progressive Negro Baptist churches of the South had their beginnings amid the vicissitudes of life peculiar to a land of human bondage. The African Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, under the direction of Dr. Robert Ryland, the white president of Richmond College, is a case in evidence.

Still another type of Negro Baptist church arose where there was no parent church of white persons in control of the offspring. There were churches of this character in Virginia, Georgia, South Carolina, the British West Indies, Canada, and in far-off Africa, before the close of the eighteenth century. In these churches the members were of the black race. In Virginia and in Georgia churches of this class as well as others were admitted to membership in the oldest and best white Baptist associations, in which they at one time were given considerable attention.⁵ It is worthy of note that Negro Baptist churches of this type were the first Negro Baptist churches in all the land and preceded by many years the first Negro churches of other denominations in America.

These churches, moreover, soon established themselves in spite of opposition, for they were accepted by the Baptist associations. The Negro Baptist Church organized at Silver Bluff, South Carolina, in 1773 or 1775, probably had no such connection, nor did that of George Liele in

⁵ By way of comparison, be it further remembered, that the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church was originally a member of the St. George Society, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and he and others withdrew from that body of white persons in 1787; but it was not until 1794, that Bishop Francis Asbury constituted the Bethel A. M. E. Church at Philadelphia, which claims to be the oldest Negro Methodist church in the country. The Zion Church, of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion connection, New York City, was founded in 1796, while the first church of Negro Episcopalians, the St. Thomas Church, Philadelphia, was planted by Bishop William White in 1794. The Lombard Street Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, the oldest organization of Negro Presbyterians in America, was constituted in 1807, and not until 1829 was the first church of Negro Congregationalists, the Dixwell Avenue of New Haven, Conn., constituted.

Savannah, established not long thereafter; but the Negro Baptist Church of Williamsburg, Virginia, sought membership in the Dover Association in 1791 and was accepted. This church, according to John W. Cromwell, who is himself a Methodist, was founded in the year 1776. In 1815 the Gillfield Baptist Church, of Petersburg, Virginia, a Negro congregation, united with the Portsmouth Association, an organization of white Baptists. Shortly after doing so this church invited the association to hold its approaching annual meeting with the Gillfield Baptist Church. The "invitation was accepted and the church appointed a committee to rent stables and to buy feed for the delegates' horses." Richard Kennard, from whose church record we quote, adds: "A committee was also appointed to furnish blacking and brushes with which to clean the delegates' boots and shoes, and to see to the general comfort of the delegates." We agree with Mr. Kennard in the reflection: "At that age there did not seem to be as much prejudice among Christians or as much separation as since."*

The second step in the development was that of expansion abroad. There had been planted Negro Baptist churches, like the First African Baptist Church of Augusta, Georgia, in 1793, and Amos's Church at New Providence, Bahama Islands, British West Indies, in 1788. George Liele carried the work of the Baptists into Jamaica in 1784; and David George extended it to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and finally into Sierra Leone about the same time. In this connection it may be remarked that because a Baptist church can arise and continue to exist as a self-originating, self-governing body without any consent or approval from without, the work of the denomination rapidly expanded. White ministers fully ordained to the ministry Negro Baptists, Negro Episcopalians and Negro Presbyterians and inducted them into pastorates, at a time when the Methodist Episcopal Church in America was not at first inclined to do

* Richard Kennard's *History of the Gillfield Baptist Church*, p. 16.

so. This denomination, therefore, brought about that condition which resulted in the setting up of an independent African Methodist denomination under Peter Spencer in 1812, of another under Richard Allen in 1816, and still another under James Varick in 1820.

It should be remarked, moreover, that all Negro Baptist churches, except those in the South, which came out of white churches during slavery, had Negro pastors. Yet whatever their differences, Negro Baptists and white Baptists in America constituted one family until after the Civil War. Indeed there has never been any formal separation of the two groups. Each has simply followed the race instinct, in an age of freedom, while the one group cooperates with the other, North and South.

There were Negro Baptist churches in the South for more than a quarter of a century before they began to be constituted in the North, and about a half century before the first church of the kind was planted in the West. When in 1805, moreover, the first African Baptist church was organized at Boston, Massachusetts, it was not only the first Negro Baptist church in the North, but was also the only independent Negro church north except the St. Thomas Episcopal Church of Philadelphia, which had a Negro rector. The Boston African Baptist church had for its pastor a Negro, the Rev. Thomas Paul, a man of such intelligence and piety, such commanding presence and pleasing address, that pulpits everywhere in Massachusetts and in his native State of New Hampshire, were open to him, both before and after he became a minister in that city.

In the course of time Negro Baptist churches tended to associate among themselves, as they developed power independently of the white churches. There were in the South during the Negro's enslavement, however, no Negro Baptist associations which embraced their churches in any State or in any considerable part of a State; for all Negro Baptist churches were associated with white Baptist churches in the South. The "Richmond African Baptist

Missionary Society," which was constituted at Richmond, Virginia, in 1815, was no exception to the rule. Lott Cary,⁶ the chief spirit in that organization, and Mr. Wil-

⁶ Let me quote here a paragraph from Sprague's *Annals of the American Pulpit*, Vol. VI, p. 583, (Ed. 1860, published by Robert Carter and Brother, New York.) The paragraph appears in an article which the publisher takes from *Taylor's Memoirs.—Missionary Heroes and Martyrs.*

"In 1850, the late Rev. Eli Ball of Virginia, visited all the Liberian Baptist Missionary Stations, as agent of the Southern Baptist Missionary Convention, and, with considerable difficulty, ascertained the spot where Lott Cary was buried. The next year, a small marble monument was sent out, and placed over the grave, with the following inscription:—

"On the front of the monument was—

LOTT CARY

Born a slave in Virginia,

1780,

Removed from Richmond to Africa, as a
Missionary and Colonist,

1821,

Was Pastor of the First Baptist Church,
and an original settler and defender
of the Colony at Monrovia.

Died Acting Governor of Liberia

Nov. 10th, 1828.

His life was the progressive development of an
able intellect and firm benevolent heart,
under the influence of

Freedom and an enlightened Christianity;
and affords the amplest evidence of the capacity
of his race to fill with dignity and usefulness
the highest ecclesiastical and political stations.

Of a truth God is no respecter of persons,
But hath made of one blood all nations of men.

On the reverse—

Lott Cary's self-denying, self-sacrificing labors,
as a self-taught Physician, as a Missionary and
Pastor of a Church, and finally as
Governor of the Colony,

have inscribed his name indelibly on the page of history,
not only as one of Nature's Noblemen, but as an eminent
Philanthropist and Missionary of Jesus Christ.

'Aye, call it holy ground,
The place where first they trod;
They sought what here they found,
Freedom to worship God.' "

That is, indeed, a remarkable utterance, coming from the Southern Baptist Missionary Convention, in the year 1851.

liam Crane, a white merchant, its corresponding secretary, were members of the same church—not a Negro Baptist church, for there was no organization of the kind in Richmond at the time. Lott Cary was converted under the preaching of a white pastor. At the hands of that white pastor he was baptized, into the fellowship of the white church of which that pastor was the spiritual leader Lott Cary was received, and from that white church, the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, Lott Cary went to plant the standard of Christ on the shores of Africa.

Negro Baptist associations in this country were the achievements of free men on free soil. The Providence Association of Ohio, organized in 1833, and the Wood River Association of Illinois, organized in 1838, led the way. The colored Baptist churches of the North and East organized in 1840, and the abolition of slavery as an American institution resulted in the nation-wide formation of Negro churches, local associations, State conventions, and larger groups. In 1866 a national convention which merged the forces of the North and South, the East and West, under the significant name, "The Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention," was organized. Its chief work was in the South and confined to the period of Reconstruction. In 1873 the West revived its organization under the name, "The Baptist General Association of the Western States and Territories," and the Northern churches did likewise in 1875 in the formation of "The New England Baptist Missionary Society." Each enlarged its borders until the two embraced the greater part of the whole country. In 1880 the Negro Baptists of the country formed their first national society to do work in foreign lands exclusively. The organization constituted at this time took the name, "The Baptist Foreign Mission Convention of the United States."

In 1886, at St. Louis, Missouri, the National Baptist Convention was formed, and the work of this organization was subsequently so modified that in it is unified all the

national and international church work in which Negro Baptists of America were engaged. These efforts toward organization, however, were not altogether satisfactory, for the Baptists soon developed a factional struggle in regard to the question as to independent action or cooperation with the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and the American Baptist Home Mission Society. In 1897, in the Shiloh Baptist Church, Washington, D. C., the Lott Cary Baptist Foreign Missionary Convention was formed by certain churches in the Atlantic States which looked with disfavor on the independent mission work as conducted by the Foreign Mission Board of the National Baptist Convention. Composed chiefly of men and women who were educated in the schools of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, this organization has from the first cooperated with Northern Baptists in the prosecution of its work.

At Chicago in 1915 there arose a more serious division in the forces of the National Baptist Convention as the result of differences of opinion in regard to the ownership of the Convention in the lands and chattels of its Publishing Board. As a result of these differences there have developed two groups of colored Baptists in this country, engaged in similar work, and each claims to be the National Baptist Convention—the original and only National Baptist Convention of Negro Baptists in America.

One of the results of the association of Negro churches has been education. Negro Baptists in a land of slavery were not supposed to be versed in the knowledge of books. But inasmuch as master and slave were instructed out of the same inspired writings Sabbath after Sabbath, the slave quite frequently was as familiar with the Bible as his master. Ignorance and illiteracy are not one and the same thing. An unlettered people may be learned in the word of God, and being made wise unto salvation, may present to the world no mean type of Christian life. Apart from the knowledge received through the regular preaching of the gospel by the best preachers of the Southland,

it was not unlawful to impart verbal instruction to slaves, in Sunday-school exercises and, under other circumstances, in regard to any number of things which have to do with conduct and character and human comfort, so long as nothing was said to endanger the institution of slavery. But some Baptists appear to have given some measure of literary training to Negroes attached to their churches. Andrew Bryan, in one of his letters to Dr. John Rippon of London, England, in 1800, speaks of the fact that certain white friends in Savannah, Georgia, had purchased a man of color of many excellent qualities, the Rev. Henry Francis, and had given him his freedom that he might be a teacher to his people. Bryan himself then opened a school for the slaves on his plantation outside of Savannah. George Liele established a school in connection with his church in Jamaica, hoping to develop the minds of his communicants that he might properly edify their souls.

The First Baptist Church (white), Richmond, Virginia, moreover, conducted a school for the literary training and instruction of its Negro members. For several years Lott Cary was a student in this institution. The church at Williamsburg, Virginia, which was a Negro Baptist church from its beginning, that is, from 1776, must have done something for education, for it kept correct church records, in the handwriting of its own members. Many of the Negro Baptist preachers of the South, moreover, obtained some degree of scholarship by private instruction and so won the respect of the people among whom they lived. The close of the Civil War brought together a group of scholarly men, from the North and West, men of purpose and consecration, preachers of great power who were an inspiration to their less cultured and less scholarly brethren in the South, and these invaded our Southland to help forward the new order of things in the churches as well as in civil life.

To-day the Negro Baptists of America have more than

20,000 churches, with about two and a half million members and church property valued at more than forty million dollars. They are conducting orphan schools, homes for the aged poor, and institutions of learning, and are as zealous as ever in sending the gospel to people in foreign lands. Great has been the progress of Negro Baptists in America, but that progress was due in very great measure to Northern philanthropy during a quarter of a century after the Civil War and is promoted also to-day by the good will of Southern Baptists who have put at the disposal of Negro Baptists in the South thousands of dollars. But the greatest glory of Negro Baptists is the spirit of self-help and heroic sacrifice in the endeavor to help others, and that spirit is now everywhere prevalent.

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